

LETTERS FROM READERS

"The National Review"

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I was surprised and chagrined at Dwight Macdonald's "Scrambled Eggheads on the Right" article in the April issue. I would not have expected political agreement with *National Review*; but I have come to expect from COMMENTARY incisive penetration and responsible discussion. Mr. Macdonald's hackneyed, stereotyped, hatchet job was not worthy of COMMENTARY's high standing among our journals of opinion. . . .

Mr. Macdonald is apparently anxious that none of his readers develop the urge to go and read NR for themselves. So he must reiterate that NR is dull, ineptly written, etc., etc. One of his favorite criticisms is that NR is "vulgar." Also "brutal." Well, let's take some of Macdonald's own comments: "the half-educated lumpen-bourgeoisie . . . intellectually underprivileged . . . crackpot . . . the Joan of Arc of . . . the aura of Count Dracula's castle . . . merrily chases its tail . . . weird . . . sleazy . . . Buckley tribe. . . ." And finally this gem (which Mr. Macdonald is so proud he quotes from himself): "the effect of a brief . . . on behalf of a pickpocket caught in the men's room of the subway." I challenge Mr. Macdonald to find any vulgarity of that caliber in NR. . . .

Mr. Macdonald basks in the aura of his supposed intellectual superiority, and the intellectual inferiority of (a) everyone on the right, and (b) everyone on NR. This of course is essential in a hatchet job; to admit that the people on NR had something to say would mean that every responsible intellectual would be obliged to read it, and this would not do at all. Who knows how many conversions might take place? But isn't it strange that among this unintelligent lot, Mr. Macdonald seems to have considerable difficulty in knowing what's going on? Thus we have Willmoore Kendall, whom Macdonald calls "abstruse," "abstract," etc., etc. Apparently it is difficult to satisfy Macdonald. The writers are either too simple or too intelligent, too scanty or too documented (witness his indictment of NR's "grim thoroughness" on the subject of Presidential disability). . . . When a subject be-

comes a little complex, Mr. Macdonald calls it abstruse, or grimly thorough, or indirect. And when Buckley mentions such polysyllabic words as "premises" or "postulates," Macdonald indicts NR for being "opaque." If the high and the low confuse or annoy Macdonald, is he only content somewhere in the middle? Has Dwight Macdonald become at last "middle-brow"?

MACDONALD'S brief article is filled with inconsistencies and inner contradictions, of which the above is but a sample. There are errors of commission and omission. First, John Chamberlain is conjured up as a truly professional journalist who must be clearly disgusted at the goings-on; in the very next paragraph, we find that the old Chamberlain *Freeman* committed the very same sins. Second, Macdonald often uses the word "egghead," but NR does not. Let Macdonald point to examples. He says definitely that NR denounces "eggheads" vociferously; I state flatly that he is completely wrong. . . . And, by the way, I will pit the intellectuality and literateness of Frank Meyer (or of Erik Kuehnelt-Leddihn, or of Robert Phelps, or of Roy Campbell, or of Wilhelm Röpke) against a dozen assorted Dwight Macdonalds. None of these men, of course, are mentioned in Macdonald's article, even though they play a considerable role in the magazine.

It's unfortunate that Macdonald, whom I remember as a pleasantly anarchistic editor of *Politics*, adopts the sterile conformism of the current left views on the extreme right. So he holds up Russell Kirk as the true conservative amongst all the pseudos. Kirk, the professed opponent of individualism, the derogator of individual liberty, the worshipper of power, is hailed as "the only consistently humane and civilized voice on the magazine." If Macdonald has heard of John Stuart Mill or considers him important, I suggest that he turn to the debate on Mill between Kirk and Frank Meyer in recent issues of NR. And let him turn to Meyer's column. After he finishes, perhaps he will be able to recognize a truly consistent, civilized voice. . . .

Macdonald, alas, finds the editorial board of NR "obscure." Perhaps the obscurity is a reflection of a deficient education on Macdonald's

part. I invite him to become acquainted with the writings of the other contributors. Let him read Frank Chodorov's *One Is a Crowd*, or even go back to the files of his old magazine *Analysis*; let him at least try to read Richard Weaver's *Ideas Have Consequences*; let him read the erudite Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's *Liberty or Equality* or his novel *Black Banners*; or the numerous works of Wilhelm Röpke. Forrest Davis is co-author of Lindley and Davis's *How War Came*, a nationally famous book; John Abbot Clark is the author of a very interesting, lengthy New-Yorker type profile about the *New Yorker*, which Macdonald unaccountably omitted to mention, etc., etc.

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of this unfortunate article is the sterile conformity of its thinking, so unlike what we used to expect from Dwight Macdonald. From his Olympian height of majoritarian conformism, along with Riesman, Hofstadter, *et al.*, Macdonald looks down and sneers at the "isolated minority group," the handful of extremists battling a world of enemies. What has happened to the doughty champion of individual non-conformity, of rights of minorities? I guess it all depends on whose minority group is being gored.

A very good article could have been written in criticism, even hostile criticism, of NR. But Dwight Macdonald did not write it. His customary urbanity and insight have given way to cliché and mud-slinging. Evidently his hatred of NR (note his unwillingness to concede any principles at all to the right), became for him the overriding consideration.

Surely it is misleading to the reader not to inform him of Dwight Macdonald's personal vendetta against some of the staff of NR. What were the relationships between Macdonald and William Schlamme within the Luce empire? And what of the famous dispute between Macdonald and Burnham when the latter first broke with the Trotskyist movement?

MURRAY N. ROTHBARD

New York City

MR. MACDONALD writes:

Mr. Rothbard seems to be a typical *National Review* reader. He has the touch of paranoia: he sees a "hatchet job," a plot to discourage "responsible intellectuals" from even opening the magazine lest they be converted, and he sees me as a conformist liberal; in fact, I haven't been a liberal since 1936, I cannot imagine any intellectual, responsible or irresponsible, being converted by NR, and the reason I called NR dull, inept, crude, unprincipled, etc., etc. (and copiously documented the adjectives) is just that I think it is. He is also obtuse, complaining of my "unwillingness to

concede any principles at all to the right," when I make precisely the point that a true conservative *has* principles (and give examples) whereas NR doesn't (ditto) and hence is not a conservative organ, as it claims to be, but rather is subversive in the sense its patron demagogue, Senator McCarthy, is—i.e., it is undermining our traditions.

To reply to a few other points. . . . He objects that my own style is as vulgar as I allege NR's to be. Leaving aside the fact that *tu quoque* never proves anything (maybe *both* styles are low), I'd say there's nothing intrinsically vulgar about my phrases and that the context, which he doesn't give, shows they are either humor (as the Dracula crack, which, incidentally, ribs the liberals rather than the Buckleys) or else are justified (Mr. Schlamme's man-of-the-world pose is sleazy). . . . I see no difficulty in complaining both about NR's "intellectual inferiority" and the turgid, laborious nature of some articles—in fact the latter illustrates the former. My critic confuses the solemn with the profound and thinks five-dollar words add up to intellectual riches. . . . I still think "obscure" is the word for most of the NR "Associates," including those so triumphantly listed by Mr. Rothbard. I did have a paragraph on the Clark series on the *New Yorker*. It was cut for space. I wondered why NR gave 10,000 words to a garrulous commentary on the pre-1940 *New Yorker*, and I wondered why Mr. Clark, who admired the magazine so much (that is, the old, old *New Yorker*, not the present one, of course), hadn't learned anything about writing from it. . . . The fact that NR speaks only for an isolated minority doesn't make it ridiculous, of course. What struck me as comic was that a journal of the ultra-nationalist right, battling for free enterprise and property rights, should show the same paranoiac traits as a Marxist splinter group. I apologize for any implication that the magazine's isolation is reprehensible; on the contrary, it's the nicest thing about it! . . . I've had no vendettas with any of the NR staff; I've always rather liked Buckley personally; Burnham and I exchanged political insults in *Partisan Review* years ago, and we certainly don't admire one another, but we have never been on unfriendly terms; Schlamme came into the Luce empire after I had left and we have never met. . . . Finally, I'm sorry not to have been able to take NR seriously—some of my liberal friends have also objected to the article on that ground, from the opposite viewpoint to Mr. Rothbard's—and I promise that when and if it improves enough to make it worth attacking in earnest, I'll do so.

Incidentally, I was wrong when I stated

"Buckley has nine brothers and two sisters, give or take a couple." In fact, he has three brothers and six sisters, according to an article of my own in the *Reporter* of May 27, 1952.

Jewish Music

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

It is not my habit to jump at mistakes, but there were several errors in Albert Weisser's review of my *Anthology of Jewish Music* (January issue) which I feel are too important to ignore.

Nissye Belzer-Spivak, whom Mr. Weisser cites as representative of composers who "played down Hasidic influence" was in fact the personification of the Hasidic *hazan*. (He bore the name "Nissye Belzer" because he was a Belzer Hasid.) I left him out of the book along with other equally important figures whom I still hope to include in future volumes.

As for Mr. Weisser's objection to the Schoenberg piece as being out of place in the *Anthology*, I should like to say that if the piece possesses any of the qualities which he himself attributes to it (a relation to the Biblical cantillation and an echo of the congregation at prayer), it most certainly belongs in the book. What is more, if I could convince a man like Schoenberg, whose musical thinking has left its mark on every modern composer, to write a piece which he himself referred to as "approximately a similar expression" of the original liturgical motif that I sent him, I felt it was important enough to be included in an *Anthology of Jewish Music*. Schoenberg felt that his piece conveyed the approximate mood of the original motif. Mr. Weisser thinks the Schoenberg piece is "as far from Eastern European Jewry as expressionist Vienna was from Hasidic Vitebsk." But Vitebsk was never Hasidic. . . .

CHEMJO VINAVER

New York City

MR. WEISSER writes:

Nowhere did I say that the great Nissye Belzer was *not* a Hasidic cantor. I was speaking of Belzer, and some other composers not found in Mr. Vinaver's anthology, who "either played down Hasidic influence or strove to emphasize . . . the older and perhaps more universal sacred chants of the synagogue." This is certainly somewhat different from what Mr. Vinaver implies that I said. Belzer may very well have been, in doctrine, a Hasidic cantor, but I think it equally demonstrable that in portions of his best works he broke out of the Hasidic mold and summoned up a tonal art much more analogous to the older traditions.

Nor does Mr. Vinaver quote me accurately

on Schoenberg's piece. I wrote that "in certain motives and their subsequent development a kind of *vague* relation to the melodic organization of Biblical cantillation may be recognized and one may even hear if one tries hard enough a kind of idealized representation of a congregation at prayer. . . ." No one is questioning Schoenberg's position in modern music. That seems quite plain. We are concerned here with his setting of the 130th Psalm: we must applaud Schoenberg's endeavor, but cannot be blind to the fact that his was a wholly personal and private idiom totally foreign to the musical temper of Eastern European Jewry. To put his piece in a volume whose subtitle reads "The Sacred Chant and Religious Folk Song of the Eastern European Jews" still strikes me as somewhat capricious.

Politicians

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I have just received a letter from an old friend in New York—Morris E. Moskovitz—pointing out an error in my story "The Politicians" (March 1956), and he is correct.

Mr. Chauncey Depew, whom I call in my story a Sachem of Tammany Hall and its greatest orator, was really a power in the Republican party of that era, and the attorney for the Vanderbilt railroad empire. However, since the Republican party of Thomas Collier Platt was on a par with the Tammany Democratic party of Richard Croker, there is no need to apologize to Mr. Depew's descendants for defamation of character.

It just goes to show that when one gets old one cannot trust one's memory.

S. L. BLUMENSON

El Cerrito, California

TO THE EDITOR OF COMMENTARY:

I just finished reading "The Politicians" in the March issue of your magazine, and I must tell you that I experienced a rare thrill. . . . It brought back to me a feeling of pride in the strength of character of our people of that era on the East Side of New York. But above all I was delighted by the episodes and their actors, as presented by the talented and humorous Mr. Blumenson. . . .

My heart goes out to Yussel Tunick. I know exactly how he feels. The only consolation I can offer him is that he is not alone. There were thousands of these so-called "betrayals" and "betrayers." Most of them managed to live it down. I hope Yussel did also. . . .

S. KORTCHMAR

New York City